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FM AMEMBASSY MOGADISHU  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1044

C O N F I D E N T I A L MOGADISHU 10701

ALSO FOR INR/B AND INR/DB

E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR  
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SUBJ: DISCUSSION WITH GENERAL MOHAMED ALI SAMANTAR

11. (C) ENTIRE TEXT.

12. SETTING: ALTHOUGH GENERAL SAMANTAR CURRENTLY HOLDS NO OFFICIAL POSITION, HE REMAINS ONE OF SOMALIA'S PRINCIPAL POLITICAL FIGURES. ACCORDINGLY, I CALLED ON HIM AT HIS QUARTERS DECEMBER 4. I FOUND HIM LIVING IN A VERY LARGE AND ELABORATELY FURNISHED HOME WITHIN THE PERIMETER OF THE MOGADISHU OFFICERS' CLUB. HE WAS IN APPARENT GOOD HEALTH AND SPIRITS, ALTHOUGH JUDGING BY THE CONDITION OF HIS FINGERS HE BITES HIS NAILS A LOT.

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13. DOMESTIC POLITICS: THE FORMER VICE PRESIDENT, PRIME MINISTER, DEFENSE MINISTER, ARMY COMMANDER, ETC. PUT NO DISTANCE BETWEEN HIMSELF AND THE REGIME. HE WAS CRITICAL OF THE OPPOSITION FOR ITS ALLEGED COMPLICITY IN THE VIOLENCE WHICH HAS PLAGUED MOGADISHU FOR MONTHS. (HE ADMITTED, HOWEVER, THAT THE HEAVY FIGHTING OF THE PREVIOUS NIGHT WAS TRIBAL IN ORIGIN.) AFTER BLAMING THE OPPOSITION FOR MUCH OF THE OTHER VIOLENCE, HE ASKED RHETORICALLY HOW ITS LEADERS COULD EXPECT THE NEW CONSTITUTION TO FUNCTION IN SUCH AN ENVIRONMENT. HE DID NOT ADVOCATE ABANDONMENT OF THE POLITICAL REFORM PROCESS, BUT HE ALSO HAD THE FRANKNESS TO MAKE IT CLEAR HE IS NOT ITS ARDENT SUPPORTER. WHEN THE CAIRO ROUNDTABLE WAS RAISED, HIS OBJECTIVE FOR THE MEETING SEEMED LIMITED TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A CEASE-FIRE.

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14. ISLAMIC FERMENT: THE GENERAL SPOKE MOST INTERESTINGLY ON THE SUBJECT OF TURBULENCE WITH THE LOCAL ISLAMIC COMMUNITY. WITH OBVIOUS REGRET, HE SAID FOREIGN INFLUENCES ARE DISTURBING A COMMUNITY WHICH HAD BEEN NOTED FOR ITS TOLERANCE AND PEACEFULNESS. THE VILLIANS HE IDENTIFIED INCLUDED MILITANTS FOR THE SEVERAL SUFI ORDERS WHICH HAVE LONG EXISTED IN SOMALIA, AS WELL AS MORE RECENTLY ARRIVED SECTS, E.G. THE WAHHABI OF SAUDI ARABIA. ALTHOUGH HARDLY A RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT, SAMANTAR MENTIONED THAT SOME OF THE YOUNG SOMALIS WHO GO TO IRAQ TO STUDY ON IRAQI SCHOLARSHIPS RETURN AS BAATHISTS. FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, HE CONSIDERED THIS ELEMENT AMONG THE MOST POTENTIALLY DISRUPTIVE, ALTHOUGH QUITE LIMITED IN INFLUENCE AT THE MOMENT. THE WHOLE PHENOMENON OF RELIGIOUS FERMENT HE CONSIDERED MORE SIGNIFICANT FOR SOMALIA'S FUTURE THAN IT IS AT PRESENT, WHERE HE SAW ITS IMPACT AS MARGINAL.

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15. THE GULF: NOT SURPRISINGLY, THE COMBAT VETERAN RAISED THE PROSPECTS OF WAR IN THE GULF. HE DESCRIBED SADDAM HUSSEIN, WHOM HE MET WHILE THEY WERE VICE PRESIDENTS OF THEIR RESPECTIVE COUNTRIES, AS A PARTICULARLY AGGRESSIVE AND AMBITIOUS MAN. HE PROFESSED DOUBT THAT MANY SOMALIS ARE DISSATISFIED WITH THE REGIME'S SUPPORT FOR THE COALITION BUT SUBSEQUENTLY CONCEDED THAT MANY UNEDUCATED SOMALIS ADMIRE THE IRAQI LEADER FOR DEFYING THE INFIDELS.

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16. PERSONAL ROLE: WITHOUT SAYING ANYTHING TO INDICATE RESENTMENT, SAMANTAR MADE IT CLEAR THAT HE CONSIDERED HIS CURRENT ABSENCE FROM OFFICE EXCEPTIONAL. REFERRING TO HIMSELF SEVERAL TIMES AS "A POLITICAL MAN", HE MADE NO SECRET OF THE FACT THAT HE REMAINS POLITICALLY ACTIVE, ALBEIT FROM A POSITION ON THE SIDELINES RATHER THAN CENTERFIELD.

